

Sermon for Sunday of the Most Holy Trinity– John 3:1-15

In the Name of the Father and of the Son ✠ and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

To talk about being a “born-again” Christian is somewhat like talking about canine dogs, feline cats, or holy saints. It’s a redundancy. If you are born again, you are a Christian. If you are a Christian, you are born again. Only Christians are born again, and the only way to become a Christian is to be born again.

But this term “born-again Christian” as some use it, refers to a particular point of view about how one is born again. So-called “born-again Christians” refer to the conversation between our Lord and Nicodemus in today’s Gospel, especially these words: “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” They proceed to set forth their opinion on this verse that a sinner can be born again by confessing he is a sinner and then inviting Jesus into his heart to be his own personal Lord and Savior. This is called the sinner’s prayer. If you sincerely pray this prayer, they teach, you are born again. If you have not prayed this prayer, you are not born again.

Yet, the Bible teaches something very different. When Jesus said to Nicodemus that he had to be born again to see the kingdom of God, Nicodemus responded with a question. He asked, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?” Of course, this idea is absurd. No one can do that. But our Lord isn’t talking about a physical rebirth. He is talking about a spiritual rebirth. He explained to Nicodemus how that could happen. He said, “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.”

It’s simply not true that you are born again by praying a prayer to God. The Bible nowhere teaches that. You are not born again by something you do. You are born again by what God does. God joins the water of Holy Baptism to the Holy Spirit. Baptism is therefore the means by which we receive the Holy Spirit and new spiritual birth. We, who are by nature spiritually helpless and dead, are born from above by the Holy Spirit and made God’s children. It’s false doctrine to say that you become a Christian by means of praying a prayer. Only Christians can pray to God. That means becoming a Christian is up to God, not us. And God does this work of promised new birth in the waters of Holy Baptism.

“How can these things be?” asks Nicodemus at night. He’s afraid to talk to Jesus during the daytime, when others might see him. He wants to know. He insists on knowing how Christ can do the things that only God can do. Christ meets Nicodemus where he’s at. And in teaching Nicodemus, He’s also teaching us. He teaches us that we are in no position to place the Word of God under the judgement of human reason. What God says is so because God says so. God doesn’t need our understanding and certainly not our approval. And just because we don’t fully understand something doesn’t make it false.

For example, Jesus is no mere rabbi or teacher sent by God. Jesus is the Word become flesh, true God and true man. We confessed this in the Athanasian Creed. The Son is “God begotten from the substance of the Father before all ages; and He is man, born from the substance of His mother in this age.” Who can fully understand this mystery of Christ being both God and man? And yet it’s true.

Also, by Christ's authority, we are baptized into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. The Father teaches us to listen to Christ, His only begotten Son. The Holy Spirit testifies to Christ. In Holy Baptism, we put on Christ. We are buried and raised with Christ. We are made Christians. And so we are. This means we are Trinitarians. We confessed it: "And the catholic faith is this, that we worship one God in Trinity and Trinity in Unity." In the third chapter of John's Gospel the Triune God is clearly revealed. The Father sends the Son. The Son is lifted up on the cross. All who believe in the Son sent by the Father have everlasting life. The Holy Spirit grants new birth so we can look to the Son in faith, even a faith that reason cannot comprehend. That which is born of the flesh is flesh and remains flesh. We must be born again through Holy Baptism to receive new and spiritual birth.

This spiritual birth is a mystery of our faith. You aren't born again by making a deal with God whereby you give Him your heart and He gives you salvation. You were born again by His grace and by His grace alone.

God's grace defies the standards of human reasonableness. And what seems reasonable when it comes to faith is often times false. That an outward washing of the body could be the means of cleansing the soul is unreasonable. "How can water do such great things? Certainly not just water, but the Word of God in and with the water does these things." And God's Word teaches us about God's grace. Human reason consistently denies God's grace. To deny that we are born again spiritually in Holy Baptism is to set human reason above the clear Word of God. Baptism is a washing of water, but not only water, but of water and the Holy Spirit. Christians have always believed that being born of water and the Spirit refers to Baptism. There's no other way to interpret it.

But because we can't understand how God saves us by placing His name upon us in Holy Baptism, we may be inclined to question that He actually does it. So too with the Trinity. We can't understand how God can be one God and be three persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Does that make it untrue? Jehovah's witnesses mock the Holy Trinity. They say the devil invented the teaching that God is one divine being and three distinct persons. They bow before the god of reason and insist that God cannot be above our understanding. They will not believe God's truth when they can't be in control of it.

And yet God must be Triune. The Father sends the Son because salvation comes from God alone. God must be Triune because the Son is not merely a man, for a mere man cannot destroy sin and death by bearing all our sins and dying our death. God must be Triune because the Holy Spirit saves us. He proceeds from the Father and the Son to give us new birth and new life. He is the Lord and Giver of life. Who else can create spiritual life but God alone? And this He does apart from human wisdom.

The reason why many people refuse to baptize babies is because they think to themselves that a baby cannot believe in Christ. And what? Like we can see faith in an adult? Faith is a gift: "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to Him ..." Faith is not a human achievement. Now, it's usually the case that adults will come to faith before they are baptized. In the Scriptures, faith and Baptism always go together. The order of things – whether we believe first and then are baptized or are first baptized and then believe – is not the point. The point is the relationship between faith and Baptism. Faith receives what Baptism gives. We don't baptize

babies because we see the evidence of their faith. Neither can we see the evidence of an adult's faith. Sure, we can hear a good confession of the truth and we can watch and see if a man or woman lives a life to support that confession. But we can't see inside a person's heart. We can't see if their deeds are fruits of faith or just for outward show. Faith is invisible to everyone except God. God knows those who belong to Him, as Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of God. Assuredly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will by no means enter it." In these words, the Bible clearly teaches infant faith. We don't baptize babies because of what we see in the baby. To be born again is to undergo a spiritual rebirth into God's kingdom that only God can see. This happens not by our strength and reason. This happens by God's Word of promise.

It must have appeared to be utterly unreasonable for the victims of poisonous snakes to look up to the bronze serpent on a pole and be saved. But God commanded Moses to put a bronze serpent on a pole so that those who were dying from the venom of poisonous snakes would live and not die. Those who looked lived just as God said they would. The serpent on the pole was a sign of the cross of Christ. Faith is as simple as looking. But the looking is not the looking of reasonable men and women seeking rational evidence upon which to build their faith. The looking of faith is the looking of a sinner dying from the poison of his own sin. Within us there is no hope. We look to Christ who drank the poison of the world's sin, suffering its bitterness, guilt, and shame, and overcoming it by His innocence. The looking of faith is the receiving of God's grace. Through faith, we receive God himself. We simply receive. We don't do and in our doing trust in ourselves for doing. We rest in God's doing. We find confident security in the Baptism God first worked in us. Through faith, we worship the Holy Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and despise all other gods as worthless idols.

We are precious in the sight of the One who created faith in us. Yes, we are tossed here and there by doubts. Yes, we are plagued by sin and guilt from the inside. Yes, we are afflicted by persecutions from the outside. Still, in these, we are precious in the sight of God. As we celebrate Trinity Sunday, we celebrate the faith that God, through Holy Baptism, continues to establish in our hearts. We are truly born again. We are born from above. We have inherited the kingdom of God. Amen.

The Peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. ✠BJF✠